

Report on Research Compliance Volume 19, Number 7. June 23, 2022 ARPA-H Begins to Take Shape Amid Questions About Scope, Mission, Overlap With NIH

By Theresa Defino

NIH's highest ranking external advisory committee had just heard a spirited, hour-long explanation about the agency's Advanced Research Project Agency for Health (ARPA-H), punctuated by enthusiastic interjections from Adam Russell, ARPA-H's acting deputy director, who'd been on the job barely two weeks.

Next up was Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, to give an update on COVID-19 to the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD). After his presentation, an ACD member told Fauci she was concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on Native American and rural populations.

Could an ARPA-H effort help target the underserved, wondered Roberta Diaz Brinton, director of the University of Arizona's Center for Innovation in Brain Science. Fauci responded that, since the start of the pandemic, NIH has had a task force addressing the adverse effects of COVID-19 on minority and other vulnerable groups.

"I'm not so sure we need an ARPA-H for it—whatever that is," added Fauci, who was not present for the earlier discussion.

Still, talk of ARPA-H has been in the media and on the lips of Congress, the White House and HHS officials for more than a year. President Biden first proposed the agency as part of NIH in an April 9, 2021, memorandum to Congress in advance of his fiscal year (FY) 2022 budget, seeking \$6.5 billion for the project.^[1]

Modeled after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), it is to have "an initial focus on cancer and other diseases such as diabetes and Alzheimer's" and represent an "investment in Federal research and development [to] drive transformational innovation in health research and speed application and implementation of health breakthroughs," the budget memorandum explained at the time.

More recently, ARPA-H was approved by Congress in March as part of its final continuing resolution for FY 2022, which began in October. It was even the focus of some backlash. On March 31, Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, D-CA, chair of the Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee, called HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra's decision to place ARPA-H and "transfer funds to NIH...an opportunity squandered."^[2]

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